

THE RULE OF DUTY.

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED IN DOVER, ON FAST DAY,

APRIL 10, 1851.

BY WOOSTER PARKER,

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BANGOR:

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Dover, April 12, 1851.

REV. WOOSTER PARKER :

DEAR SIR : The undersigned, a committee appointed by the audience which listened to your Sermon, on Fast Day, respectfully request a copy for publication.

DAVID HIGGINS,
WM. F. GALLISON,
NIMROD HINDS.

Dover, April 24, 1851.

GENTLEMEN : The Sermon, though prepared without a thought of its publication, is submitted to your disposal.

Yours truly,

WOOSTER PARKER.

MESSRS. DAVID HIGGINS,
WM. F. GALLISON,
NIMROD HINDS.

THE RULE OF DUTY.

SERMON.

ACTS XVII. 11.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

PAUL had been badly treated at Thessalonica. He went into the Synagogue and preached to the people the doctrine of Christ. Some believed: indeed a great multitude believed. But the unbelieving Jews made a great uproar, and aimed to put a stop to this preaching of one greater than Cesar, by putting to death the fanatical men who were setting forth a doctrine producing so much excitement.

The charge against Paul and his associates was, that they produced so much excitement and agitation. "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also:—and these all do contrary to the decrees of Cesar, saying, that there is another king, one Jesus." They set the example which has been so well followed since, of exciting the worst passions and prejudices of men, and stirring them up to acts of atrocious violence, by misrepresenting the motives and doctrines of the advocates of truth, in order to keep the public mind quiet. To put down agitation and fanaticism, they gathered the rabble

together and assaulted the house of Jason, who, it seems, had been so impudent as to countenance and shelter such agitators and fanatics as Paul and Silas. As their violence could not reach the lives of these men, they showed their prudence and love of public quiet by venting their rage upon the person and the house of a man who was so inconsiderate as to sympathise with fanatics, who would agitate and agitate, by preaching that Jesus was greater than Cesar, and that God should be obeyed rather than men. All this, on their part, was prudent, legal, loyal, commendable. How could such fanatics and agitators be endured!

Paul left and went to Berea. Here he found men who behaved better; who were more sober and candid. He preached a new doctrine to them; but instead of refusing to hear, instead of attempting to kill its advocates, they were disposed to inquire whether it was true. Their example commends to our attention two things.

I. The manner in which moral, political and religious teaching is to be heard. And

II. The standard by which its truth is to be tested.

It is said of the Bereans to whom Paul preached, "they received the word with all *readiness of mind*." They were not only attentive and interested to hear, but they opened their minds to the preacher, and "received the word." They took into their mind the doctrine of the preacher, not blindly and stupidly, not assenting to it because it was new, nor because it was not new, nor because he taught it; but to be candidly considered and carefully weighed. It was not so with those of Thessalonica. Paul's words were not heard for candid examination. Their minds were shut up and locked against his doctrine. They heard it, not to be considered and proved, but to be rejected and repelled at once, as false and fanatical.

So, too often, it is now. The individual is prejudiced. Truth addresses the ear—though many are afraid even to hear it; it knocks in this form and in that; it speaks in the varied forms of argument, persuasion and admonition; but the mind is not opened to take it in at all. It is judged without a hearing. The mind shuts it out, and holds it out, to knock at every bolted door of man's nature, till, at length, by its continued and urgent presentation, an inward rage is excited, and the mad attempt is made to drive off the messenger of God's truth, as an intolerable intruder.

This is unworthy of man. It is injustice to truth and to himself. His reason should be exercised. His mind ought to be opened to hear, receive, and take in principles inculcated, not to be blindly and stupidly assented to, but to be examined and proved; and then to be admitted and obeyed, so far as true and no farther. There should be an honest and careful inquiry for the truth, and a readiness to yield a decided and firm obedience to the *truth*, and to nothing else. The lack of this temper of mind leaves an individual liable to disobey the most important of all truths that God has revealed to man. By thus shutting up the mind, and yielding to blind impulse, or prejudice or party, the voice of an Apostle, of a God may be unheeded, and the Son of God himself may be rejected. We were to consider

II. The standard by which the truth of the principles inculcated is to be tested.

When Paul preached to the Bereans, they “searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” He was a new preacher among them; but they did not stop to ask what was thought of him at Antioch, and Iconium, or Derbe, or Lystra, before they would listen to him. Nor did they judge of his doctrine by what Jewish Priests and Doctors of the Law thought of it, nor by what Gre-

cian Philosophers said about it. In other places, as at Thessalonica, it had been noticed that this doctrine was a new one, that it produced great excitement, that it broke up the uniformity of sentiment, that it caused difference of views and jesting among the people, and that it cut men loose, in matters of religion, from supreme allegiance to custom and to Cesar; and therefore they denounced the preacher as a babbler and a pestilent fellow, and rejected what he preached as a lie.

The Bereans were more noble; they pursued a more honorable course. The question with them was not, who preached this doctrine. Nor, does it produce difference of opinion, and feeling among the people; not, does it correspond with the teaching or precedents of our laws, our Courts or our customs; not, what is thought of this doctrine by others, in other places: But, *is it true?* And how did they decide upon its truth? Not by its immediate effects, nor by its popularity, nor by any other false standard so common then and so common now; but by appeal to the Scriptures. They searched the Scriptures *whether those things were so*. Their object was not to see whether a single isolated statement or prophesy seemed to sustain or condemn his doctrine; whether here and there a passage or part of a text could be twisted into apparant support of it; but whether it was clearly according to the tenor of the Scriptures. And they continued their inquiry, searching the Scriptures *daily*. This then is the standard, and this the means, by which the truth of what is inculcated is to be judged. This careful and candid appeal to God's word will bring us to the right conclusion.

But this supremacy of the Scriptures, as a rule of duty, was an unpopular doctrine at that day; and it is unpopular at this day. It was not then the received standard of truth and duty by the chief rulers or the priests;

and it does not appear to be the standard now, either by politicians or christians.

The subject of Slavery, in its various aspects and bearings, has come to be, as it deserves to be, *the* question of interest in our nation; and it is worthy of special notice how very rarely, both in popular and legislative discussions, are the teachings of Christ and the principles of his Gospel, referred to in deciding upon its moral character and our duty in regard to it. What thoughtful man has not been struck with the fact, that in the earnest discussions in Congress, upon matters involving the most solemn *moral* considerations, there is no respectful appeal made, and no deference paid, to the Scriptures. Indeed, by their debates and action upon the gravest matters, we should hardly be led to suppose that they knew either that there is a Bible, or a God. And when an honorable Senator referred to a "higher law" than human, and to a Legislator in Heaven above law makers in Washington, the allusion was publicly *ridiculed*. And all over the land, ever since, political editors and political men have *scouted* the idea. Not only are the principles set forth in the New Testament disregarded, but so unpopular has the doctrine become, that the Scriptures are to be consulted and that God's law is higher than man, that it is treated with public *ridicule* and contempt.

In the Apostle's time, to do or trade contrary to the "decrees of Cesar," or of the Council, or of precedent and custom, was to be worthy of death or of bonds. The question was not, whether one preached eternal *truth*; but rather whether he preached something new, something producing excitement and agitation among the friends of Cesar, and the enemies of truth; whether he preached supreme allegiance to Jesus Christ, and not to the King, or the High Priest, or the Council. And if so, he was pronounced a pestilent fellow, a disloyal babbler,

not fit to live ; and scourgings and dungeons and chains were the penalty of his course. Even the Son of God, though holy and harmless, and preaching principles of heavenly purity, and not as the Scribes, was rejected. They cried out, " He hath a devil ; away with him ! "

It seems to be by no means a settled question now, as to what is the standard by which we are to judge of truth and duty. This is an important question, and one that ought to be settled. It is the question on which depends our duty in regard to the Fugitive Slave Law, and every similar law ; it underlies and embraces many of the points, which are so often discussed, and which are regarded as so perplexing.

We hear a great deal at this day about the divine authority of human government ; and we admit the doctrine ; we advocate it. But because God has authorized human government, does it therefore follow that Congress may amend the ten commandments, or reverse the principles of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and that obedience on our part is obligatory ? We believe too in the divine appointments of the parental relation, and that it is the duty of the child to obey parental authority, as the citizen is to obey the civil authority ; but may the parent command the child to steal or murder, and is it the duty of the child to obey ? Within certain limits, the authority of government and of the parent is absolute, and the duty of obedience is unquestionable. But does it follow that they may abrogate any law of the Almighty, and that obedience is then a duty ? And yet this is the inference, and this the doctrine taught, and not by brawling come-outers and infidels alone, but by distinguished Statesmen and religious teachers. Mr. Webster is understood to teach the doctrine, that we are to obey a law of Congress in silence and without questioning its character—simply because it is law. He uses such language

as this, "The law *is* law, and must be obeyed at all hazards. *We are to hear no parleying upon it. We are to listen to no modification or qualification.*" Judge Sprague, in his recent charge to the Grand Jury in Boston, in the case of Shadrach, urges the same sentiment. He says, "Obedience is a *moral* duty. To obey the law of the land is, then, to obey the will of God." A distinguished Presbyterian clergyman*—and it is to be wished he stood alone among the Doctors—says, "The decisions of government upon all matters within their jurisdiction"—and he admits their jurisdiction "in all affairs which belong peculiarly to the present life,—in all the temporal relations which bind societies, communities and families together, in respect to all rights of persons and property, and their enforcement by penalties"—though they be erroneous, are yet, from the nature of the case, *absolute*. To plead a higher law to justify disobedience to a human law, the subject matter of which is within the cognizance of the State, is to reject the authority of God himself." These are specimens—and I wish [no others could be found—of the doctrines inculcated by those whose positions give them power.

If this inviolability of human law, thus virtually abrogating the divine, were babbled forth by avowedly infidel tongues and pulpits, it would be pronounced, with honor, bald infidelity. But I ask, does it cease to be infidel, when it is wrought into orthodox sermons, and uttered in orthodox pulpits?

We hear much of the "*Constitution*," and of law "regularly enacted." We have great reason to be thankful for the Constitution, for we owe more to it than to any one document, except the Bible. But while it is admitted that an unconstitutional law "imposes no obligation, and may be resisted by an individual or a commu-

* Rev. Dr. Lord of Buffalo, N. Y.

nity," it seems to be claimed, that any law, and every law, which is constitutional, is obligatory, and simply for this reason. This is denied. My objection to the Fugitive Slave Law is not based on its unconstitutionality alone; for, though it may be decided to be Constitutional, it is of no binding force whatever. It may be expedient and duty to suffer its penalties; but there cannot be a particle of obligation to obey it; and simply because it is contrary to the principles set forth in the New Testament.

What is the point of inquiry here, and what is the matter to be decided? Is it this, Does the Bible conform to the Constitution, and are the teachings of the Bible to be regarded so far, and only so far, as they support the Constitution? Is that the question and the fact? Or, is it this, does the Constitution conform to the Bible, and is it *therefore* to be regarded? Some seem to make one first, and some the other? Which is first and supreme? That is the primary question before the American people; and recent laws of Congress have presented this issue, so that every man is called upon to decide this matter for himself. If the Constitution is first and supreme, and law conformable to it, then, most obviously, as a standard of morality and as a perfect guide to duty, in civil matters at least, you want nothing of Paul, or Peter, or of the Holy Ghost. Instead of the New Testament, you want the *Constitution* and the *Revised Statutes*! You want simply a fair copy of the Constitution, and the "Globe," or the "Republic," giving you the laws as they are made at Washington. And we are almost compelled to think that men have believed this and acted accordingly, and that the New Testament has been discarded these twenty years. An avowed infidel does not deny that there are many good principles in the Bible, but he does deny its *primary* and *supreme* authority; and this is precisely the practical ground taken by the man—though he may be an autho-

dox minister—who holds that we are solemnly bound to obey a wicked law of Congress, if it is only Constitutional and regularly enacted. Is it so? Is this the only question to be answered? Is a law, however odious, binding upon my conscience, because it conforms to the terms of an instrument which may be imperfect because not inspired, because it is according to certain usages and precedents, and because it has been enacted and sanctioned in due form? Then certainly the New Testament is a dead book. Then Judas Iscariot, and those who imprisoned and beheaded the Apostles, and who crucified the Son of God, may expect to be acquitted at the Judgment; for, so far as appears, the laws which they obeyed were Constitutional and sanctioned. They acted under commission, and by authority; they labored zealously to quiet the public mind, to put down excitement and agitation; and they ought to be looked upon as “past worthy patriarchs;” for we are often reminded and we do not deny, that God authorized such governments as those under which Jesus and the martyrs died! And yet such astounding doctrines are taught at this day, by men high in civil and political relations, and by professedly christian ministers.

And let it be noticed, that while this obligation is urged to obey the law of the land, as a *moral* duty, by our Bible and Missionary Societies, we are earnestly endeavoring to subvert, not only the laws, but the whole social systems of other countries. Now if this law of the land is to be obeyed as supreme, in our country, it is to be in another. If a Constitutional law in our land tolerates or supports Slavery, and we are to sustain it, why should not our Missionaries sustain equally Constitutional laws in other lands, allowing Caste, Polygamy and Idol worship? How can we be piously serving God by sustaining such laws in our country, and at the same time piously serving God in

sending our men and money to subvert similar laws in other countries ? And yet in just this light do many professedly christian men and christian ministers stand out before the world ! And the fact has come to be most painfully obvious to the careful observer that, by such doctrines and by corresponding action, the ministry and churches are losing the respect and confidence of the community. Not a few of the firmest friends and cheerful supporters of christian institutions are deeply feeling, that such preaching and influence are undermining the fundamental principles, not only of religion, but of all sound *morality*. Nor do I see how this can be denied. For myself, I cannot doubt that this has done more to spread a sort of infidelity and distrust of the ministry, in New England, for the last fifteen years, than any other one cause, if not more than all other causes together.

Our supreme standard of truth and duty is the *Scriptures*. In regard to *all things whatsoever*, it is the *Scriptures*. We are to judge of our duty in regard to human laws, politics, everything, not by what others think, nor by what we think the immediate consequences will be merely, but by the principles set forth in the *Scriptures*. The moment you except one thing, the moment you admit anything else to decide your action, you practically deny the supremacy of the Bible, and make some other authority higher than God's ; and that is just what the avowed infidel does ; and I am unable to see the superiority of pious orthodox infidelity.

But some say, and some who almost boast of their christianity, " It will not do for each man to undertake to decide for himself what laws it is his duty to obey." Indeed ! Who then is to decide, and how is he to know what he should do ?

Judge Sprague, in his late charge already alluded to, supposes that men may differ in their conscientious opin-

ions and scruples about obeying certain laws; and we should have expected some allusion made to the volume of Inspiration as profitable to direct; but his remarkable language is this: "The arbiter must be society, organized soziety, pronouncing its decision through its regularly constituted agents. This is the moral judgment, the embodied conscience of the community. To this, not only is each individual bound to submit, but it is a new and controlling element in forming his own moral judgment. An act which before may have been innocent, is now criminal." This is the doctrine taught, by a distinguished Judge, to a Grand Jury, and to the people of New England. That, then, is the arbiter. Not the Bible—not a conscience enlightened by the teachings of Christ,—but the *decision of Society* through its constituted agents. This is the moral judgment, the embodied conscience of the political community. Now these "constituted agents of Society" are our Representatives and Senators in Congress, whose decision makes an act which "before may have been innocent, criminal."

And moreover, a majority of these "regularly constituted agents" at different times may be widely different, not to say opposite, in their political and moral sentiments; and of course, their "decision," their "moral judgment," their "embodied conscience" may be the opposite at one time of what it is at another; and yet, this decision is the final arbiter of duty! This is that which can change right into wrong, and of course wrong into right! To know what we should do, as to obeying a law, we are not to consult the Bible, but go to the "political community," to this body of "constituted agents," and there wait till it expresses its "embodied conscience,"—and the question of duty is settled, and plain as the light!!

Far be it from me to advocate a disregard of human

laws and civil authority. Government is to be respected and supported *within its proper limits*: and it is often duty as well as expedient to submit to and peaceably endure, for a time at least, oppressive and unjust laws. But unless the principles set forth in the Scriptures are always, and in regard to all matters, held inviolable and Supreme, something else, some other authority is allowed to be Supreme, and the Bible is made a mere book of history and suggestion.

And yet we are told, in regard to the recent law of Congress requiring us, under heavy pains and penalties, to aid in the capture and return of the fugitive slave—thus reducing the States to subjection to the laws and making them the hunting ground for Slavery—that “it will not do for every man to decide for himself as to the rightfulness of the act.” And the act required is regarded as a trifling matter—merely helping tie the ancles and wrists of a colored man together, who, it is pretended, has rights and may have justice done him, in the State where he belongs—and the man aiding may shut his eyes as soon as the victim is well bound to what follows, and go into meeting and pray, that “every yoke may be broken” and the oppressed go free! But seriously I ask, if it will not do for an individual to decide what his duty is in so small a matter as this is said to be, who shall feel himself competent to judge of the great doctrines and duties of the christian religion, matters upon which our eternal salvation depends? Can he judge of matters of infinite moment, and not of this small matter? Surely such a man ought to fly to the Pope, and make haste to kiss the toe of St. Peter, for the safety of his soul. The quicker he gives up all pretension to a thought, or a conscience, or a soul of his own, and falls dumb at the foot of a Catholic priest, the wiser and safer he will be. If a Constitution, or Congress, or Court must decide for him

in this thing, it must be presumption in him to think of deciding for himself the graver question whether he has a soul, and how it may be saved.

But I am far from regarding obedience to the law referred to, as a small matter. It requires us to aid in capturing and returning into hopeless bondage a fellow man, *who has committed no crime* except that of claiming a right to his own body. It requires us to make ourselves partners in such an act; an act which involves the execrable doctrine of *property* in man. And you, as good citizens, are commanded to aid and assist in the prompt and efficient execution of this law. If you knowingly obstruct, hinder or prevent the slave hunter from seizing the fugitive,—if you rescue, or attempt to rescue him from custody,—if you aid, or abet, or assist the fugitive directly or indirectly to escape from the claimant, or if you harbor, or conceal the fugitive, knowing him to be a fugitive, so as to prevent his discovery and arrest, you are subject to a fine of a *thousand dollars*, and *imprisonment six months*; and by way of civil damages you are liable in the additional sum of a *thousand dollars*! Such is the law we are called upon to obey, and which we are told it is a *moral* duty to obey. And all this when the fugitive may have been your esteemed neighbor for twenty years; he may be a worthy citizen, a devoted christian, and an honored minister of the Gospel of Christ.* Is

* Rev. Dr. Pennington, a colored clergyman, is the esteemed Pastor of a Presbyterian Church in New York city. He has been in Great Britian some two years; where his piety and intelligence gave him a warm reception. He is spoken of in the highest terms of respect, his character and talents being such that he has had conferred on him the honorary degree of D. D. The fact has recently come out, that he is a *Fugitive Slave*, having escaped from Maryland some twenty years ago, and that he is afraid to come back to resume his ministerial labors in New York, lest he should be seized, and torn from his family, and

obedience to such a law a small matter? Is it one in regard to which a man, with the Bible in his hand, cannot and ought not to judge for himself? Is it one in regard to which the inspired word of God does not enable him to decide what his duty is? It cannot be pretended, that obedience to it is consistent with what Christ taught when he said, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. Blessed are the merciful." There can be not a shadow of doubt as to the repugnance of the teachings of Christ to such a law and obedience to it.

But it is said, "it is the law of the land; it is Constitutional; it has been formally enacted and solemnly sanctioned." Ah, indeed! Then the question is simply this, shall, not only the principles of an unrighteous though Constitutional and sanctioned law of Congress be endured if need be—for that doctrine is assented to, and I would by no means advise resistance to officers of justice—but shall it be *respected* and *obeyed*, when it contravenes and

church, and dragged back to a southern plantation! What American does not blush at such an illustration of our civilization and christianity embodied in the Fugitive Slave Law. And well may he fear to return, if he has read the published sermons and sentiments of the Doctors of Divinity of his own Presbytery, who have so much zeal for the Union, and Union Meetings, and the Fugitive Slave Law, that it might almost be expected they would leave their studies, pulpits and prayer meetings, and go in person to chase him down, bind and deliver him to Slavery. What would some of our Christian Union men think, if it should be found out that the mother of one of our city ministers was a slave, and if, on the affidavit of his claimant, they should be called on to hunt him from his pulpit and family, and deliver him up to the owner of a southern plantation? Would not obedience be a "moral duty?" Should they pretend to decide, that they ought not to obey the law! What is a law then, which drives such a man as Dr. Pennington from his home, his pulpit and his church! And what must the world say of christians and ministers who preach obedience to such laws?

overrides the plain principles of the New Testament ? That is the question for every citizen to decide. If so, you have abandoned the Bible and the authority of God as *supreme*. If so, Congress has only to pass a law abolishing the Sabbath, and authorizing theft, murder and robbery, and if it is declared Constitutional, your duty and mine is as plain as the light. So it is according to high authority.

Says Mr. Webster, in regard to recent laws, "They were passed in conformity with the provisions of the Constitution, and they *must be performed and abided by in whatever event, and at whatever cost.*" According to Judge Sprague our duty is decided by the "political community," by the decision of the "constituted agents" of society. A law then may be passed by Congress which shall call on us to exterminate every Baptist Church, and cut off the head of every Methodist Minister in this State (and shall any man presume to decide for himself what law it is his duty to obey ?) it may threaten us with a fine of a thousand dollars, and imprisonment for six months, if we do not aid in the "prompt and efficient execution of this law;" and if it shall be declared to be in "conformity with the provisions of the Constitution," it is to be "performed and abided by in whatever event and at whatever cost." "Obedience is a *moral* duty." Most earnestly I ask, when such doctrines as these are put forth, when such rank practical Atheism as this is coming to be popular, is it not time for sober men to reflect both as to duty and consequences. It is idle to talk of our respect for the Bible, if we may assent to, and do, what the principles of the New Testament forbid, because human laws require it : Congress is exalted above Christ ; God's authority as *supreme* is denied ; and no sophistry, and no pretensions of piety can conceal the fact from the eyes of discerning men. It is no wonder, then, that our

Christianity is spurned, when, in its application to this subject, its principles are so often abandoned and practically denied by professed Christians, and so nobly defended and advocated by irreligious and even infidel men.

The Bible was given man, not to be tortured into compliance with something else, not to decide his opinions and action in some matters but not in others, but to be his rule of duty; and not only *a* rule, but *the* rule, *Supreme* in all cases, and at all times. True, there are various parties, churches, creeds, sects, and prevailing opinions; but he is to allow no one of them to be his infallible interpreter. It is to be interpreted like any other book, and he may have important aids in his inquiries after truth; but he may allow no Congress, or Court, or Council, no man, or body of men to decide his duty for him. This he cannot do without cutting loose from the supremacy of God's authority. He should search the Scriptures with readiness of mind, with candor, with an honest desire to know and follow the truth, aiming first of all to do the will of God, who is to be his final Judge.

The man who thus makes God's word his guide, is truly a happy and an honored man. True, he may be opposed and ridiculed as a fanatic, he may be hated, wronged, persecuted. All this would not be strange; this he may expect, and this he can well afford to bear. He has a simple and infallible rule of life, applicable in all cases and at all times. Its principles are simple and of universal application. His honest understanding easily perceives them, his unbribed conscience approves them, his heart pays them homage in grateful obedience, and that obedience God approves. He is above the power of changing rules and imperfect laws, honored in blissful allegiance to one, sublime, unchanging, perfect law, even God's. Others may accompany and cheer him on, or forsake and oppose him; honors may adorn or rags may

cover him ; palaces may quiet or dungeons confine him ; still he is both a happy and an honored man. He is ennobled by allegiance to truth ; he is exalted by God's approbation.

Of what inestimable value is God's word as a light and a law in this world. The law of the Lord is perfect. Its teachings are simple, but adapted to all ages, all classes, all cases, spreading over the whole wide field of moral action. It harmonizes all interests : it knows no rival ; it takes counsel of no contingencies ; it compromises with no human enactments. It is a law above all laws. They shall decrease, but this shall increase. Though unappreciated and silent in its operation, it is adapted and destined to pervade the earth—adapted and destined to subdue nations to itself, to control the energies and heal the woes of the world. Let truth have its sway,—God speed its triumph.